

Reclaim From the Grave

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Summary: After Cortana's death, the Master Chief must carry on...or not. He wakes one day and realizes that, with a stretch of belief, perhaps a certain entity from his past will know something. He has defied gods and demons, and is a monument to her sins; he never asked her, or had time to, about what her life was like when she was with the Gravemind... A continuation of my oneshot, "I Am"

1. Journey to High Charity

The others had been different.

They had been molded into shape by Halsey and Mendez, brought into being with a careful application of both skill and science. Their lives had needed meticulous planning to come out as successes, and some of them had still failed. They had needed training. They had needed instruction. They had needed parents.

The others were different.

John-117, however, had never needed any of that. He had not been molded, but had rather set the mold for the others to be made into; he had succeeded even before the procedures had begun, the paragon of a child-soldier, and the enhancements had only managed to improve what he already had. He trained himself, instructed himself. Halsey was his mother-figure, but never his mother...Mendez was a soldier, not a father. Perhaps it meant that John-117 was the one who had been different.

He had not been made for battle, but born of it. He had defied gods and demons. He was UNSC SPARTAN Sierra-117, and he was a monument to all their sins.

He had been the one to survive the battle of Reach. He had faced the Gravemind and defeated it. He had slain the Didact. He had done countless things, many of them heroic...and some which were decidedly

less so. Four ODSs had died because he'd left the lynchpin from a weight bench; he'd abandoned Cortana to the Gravemind. The number of men and women who'd died for him, and in his name, was far more vast than he would have liked. He had killed, or prepared to kill, for all of his life.

Yes...John was the different one. Baptized by blood, rather than fire, with an MA5-issue assault rifle in his hands and an AI inside of his head.

Perhaps that had been what they'd all seen in him-the differences between himself and the others?

Of course, John really didn't care all that much in the end. He wasn't supposed to care, after all; he was built to shoot a gun and swing an energy blade, to lead his SPARTAN brethren into battle. He was meant to fight, kill and die for the UNSC and its people, to protect those people he might have known if he hadn't been taken into the training program developed by Halsey and executed by Mendez.

But he'd left her behind.

She was dead, he always told himself, but he always held a nagging feeling that she still survived. Could it be that she was on Requiem, where the Didact had destroyed the terminal which she was on? Perhaps her rampancy had allowed some part of her to survive the innumerable splittings of her personality and psyche?

No, he always answered himself. She was dead.

On this day, however, he continued the train of thought; as the sun began to set on the horizon, bathing his windowed room (ironically spartan in its decor, with only a bed, a desk, and one chair) in its darkening light, he thought to himself for the umpteenth time: Cortana was dead. He may as well bury her in her rightful tomb...his mind, the place where she had spent her days and nights with him. It was only fitting, he thought, that her grave should be her home; her grave, his mind.

The answer hit him harder than a plasma grenade, and he somehow _knew _that he was right about this...the Gravemind would know if Cortana was alive, and may even contain a piece of her; he wouldn't put it past the ancient being to keep some supposed spoil of victory with itself. He knew that it knew, instinctively understood that the master parasite would be able to point him in the right direction. And if he was wrong, of course, then perhaps he would finally be able to go meet Cortana...wherever she was now.

The others wouldn't have gone after her, he believed. She had chosen him as hers, become his friend and partner. In her final moments, she had confessed that she'd wanted simply to touch him; if John-117 had owned any sense of emotion, his heart would've broken at that. He knew that she hadn't simply wanted to touch him...not his armor, at least.

His mind was made up, and nothing would change his standing on this. He would go to the Gravemind, find all the information he could as to Cortana's whereabouts, and leave...with his guns, if he had to, but he would leave. All that stood in his way was a lack of MJOLNIR armor and clearance from his only self-appointed superior in this fort:

Lord Hood himself. It was as much a blessing as it was a curse, as John felt incredibly strange to be saluted by men and women who were half (and some even looked as if they were a third) of his age. It also meant that, as a general rule, he held free reign over his daily schedule and what he was allowed to do; a few things, however, such as an officer-manned trip to the Flood-overrun former-Covenant capital of High Charity, would likely require the permission of Lord Hood.

This wasn't to say that the Master Chief wouldn't go regardless, but it would be nice to have a home to return to.

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><p>"John, you're not making any sense."<p>

"I understand that it doesn't make sense to you. That doesn't mean that it's nonsense."

Catherine Halsey was not a very pliant woman, even for the admitted favorite of all the SPARTANs she had created. He was trying to take a ship into the heart of their one true enemy's lair, formerly the home of the Covenant that had waged war against them for years...he was right, it didn't make any sense to her. She didn't see how it could make sense to anyone; his plan wasn't just nonsense, it was suicide! And worse, it was political death for the human race!

"John one-seventeen, I can't allow you to-"

"Then I'll do it without your allowance, doctor." The cold matter-of-fact tone, even though it was the same as ever, made the words sting even harder.

"Why won't you be reasonable? If you want Cortana back so badly, just take another of the Cortana modules!"

The glare he gave her was the single most-frightening thing that she had ever experienced; all her interrogations, her interviews, speeches, and so on...they couldn't compare to the absolute _hatred _he gave her in that one look. It was pained and forced, she could tell after a few seconds, but still hateful.

"You would have me..." He growled, displaying more emotion than he had since before he was taken from his home for the SPARTAN indoctrination, "...betray her memory. Dim her light with coverage by a falsity. You suggest that I leave her behind like I did when I left High Charity for the first time, like I was forced to when the Didact destroyed the terminal which I placed her in. Listen: I will not leave her behind."

He strode past her, going to the frame which would put his armor back on. First were his boots, then his shins, his arms and thighs, the knee pads, spaulders, chest plate, gloves, and finally the helmet.

"If my luck doesn't hold out, then we'll finally know what it takes to kill me."

"Was that...was that a joke?"

He walked off, ignoring her rhetorical question.

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><p>"Sierra one-seventeen...let me get this straight. You wish to take a ship to High Charity, which may or may not still be infested with Flood, and seek out the Gravemind to see if it can help you find the location of your destroyed and rampant AI, Cortana. Do I have it correctly?"<p>

"Yes, sir."

"You'll need a ship capable of interstellar travel, one-seventeen, and a crew to run it. I'll have them ready by tomorrow morning."

Behind his mask, the Master Chief's face was stone-hard in order to prevent a look of disbelief from spreading across it. "You mean that you're actually going to sanction this?"

"If anyone can pull it off, Chief, it's you. I can also say that I'm sending you there to eliminate any Flood you come across."

"Doing that would likely deter the Gravemind from helping me. I won't kill them if I don't have to."

"If you say so, Chief. Anyway, I'll have them ready by tomorrow morning; you should get prepared yourself." Lord Hood looked the Master Chief up and down, viewing his armor, wanting to laugh at himself for the suggestion. "Well, any more preparation that you'd need. The supply depot is always open, one-seventeen."

"Thank you, sir."

John exited after a quick salute, knowing that Cortana wasn't quite so far from him any more...he would be ready. Foregoing his bed in favor of the floor, which was actually more comfortable for him, he laid down and went to sleep. Seven hours later, he woke to a voice in his head; it wasn't Cortana's, or Halsey's, but it was still a voice he knew better than he'd have liked.

"You have come for her, child of the children. You seek to take back that which the Forerunner Didact ripped from you. You killed him, yes, but that which was stolen cannot truly be brought back...only replaced. I cannot promise that you will like what you have obtained, only that you will have the piece of her that remains with me. Our contact lengthened her life, though it became more painful, and she defeated her rampancy just before she was destroyed completely. Knowing this, will you still make the choice? To take up the Mantle of Responsibility for yourself, and only yourself, because you wish for her to return to you?"

The Gravemind already knew his answer. It knew that it had been defeated by this man, this John one-seventeen, and would offer no resistance. The Flood was dying; it was in its last throes now, after an eternity. They had held the Mantle once, long before the Forerunners...or even the Precursors; they had been peaceful colonizers of the stars and their planets, ruled by a trio of brothers. The Gravemind had been the eldest of them, the true-born ruler of the Flood. The middle brother, who would become the

Gravesword, commanded its armies. He went on to die at the hands of the Precursor Legion, as did their younger brother: the Gravemouth, a scientist who had been working for the physical advancement of the Flood as a species. His experiment had backfired, silently spreading throughout each of the worlds which the Flood had colonized; the first effects were unnaturally long and disease-free life, stretching their span from one hundred years to the present day...and the older they became, the worse their prognosis. In three generations, the Flood had become parasites that fed on the flesh of the living. The Gravemouth had stood at half-again the height of the Flood Hunters, and the Gravesword even taller than that; the Gravemind had slowly become a world-wrecking entity, rather than a proud king, and had gone into hiding while he commanded his people from afar.

The Precursors had failed entirely at wiping out the Flood, only succeeding in slaying the Gravesword and the Gravemouth; all the lost Flood people were recouped by the infestation of the Precursors. The Forerunners had almost failed in their attempt to contain the Flood as well...had it not been for the Halo rings, then the Gravemind would have had a chance to slay the Didact. They had failed, however, and the Flood had been unleashed upon the galaxy once more. And yet this single human, this John one-seventeen, had succeeded where entire civilizations had failed. He had charged into the heart of darkness, come out alive, and slaughtered thousands. He was, truly, the one who had the strength to wear the Mantle.

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><p>Hey, guys. This is going to be my continuation of my one-shot, I Am, and it's an idea that I've held on to since I finished Halo 3. I'm not sure how long it'll be, or what I'm going to do with it, or even if I'll continue this at all; it felt like a sincere chore when I was writing this. If anyone would like to take this off of my hands, I'll give you the details that I've already figured out (as far as the story's direction) and see where you take it.**

Keep your MA5s close and your AIs closer.

2. The First Reclamation: Cortana

After some encouragement, I'm back with chapter two; having read through chapter one, it's actually a lot smoother and more put-together than I thought...it's not going to be my main project, and I no longer have any idea where I'm going with it, but I'll run with what I can make up as I go along. In any case, l**et's get this trainwreck moving.**

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><p>Though he knew that they weren't necessary, John carried his assault rifle and magnum with him into High Charity; he just didn't feel right, as if he were a different person, without some kind of weapon in his reach. He moved through the tunnels of flesh and rock with practiced ease, and the quick gait of a soldier, ignoring any of the grotesque Flood forms that passed him by. He marched on, into the heart of High Charity, moving further and further into the lair of the creature more ancient than all of human history.<p>

When he finally came to see it, for the second time in his life, the Chief felt dwarfed by its massive size. It was formed of thousands of bodies, a million years of thoughts and memories that were collected from all the Flood and their innumerable hosts over the years. This was not the original Gravemind, the Primordial, who had spoken with the Didact as he lay dying...but the Flood's king was still there, commanding his people as a king would and should.

"**"Child of the children, you have returned at last...I have survived your attempt to destroy me, as you can see. One of those accursed rings is certainly enough to kill the majority of my people, but never will it be able to defeat me; my only enemy is time."**

His words reminded the Master Chief of something that the Didact had said: _"Time was your ally, Human, but now it has abandoned you."_

"**"To that end, I will give you back your ancilla; she now contains my knowledge, of a hundred thousand millions of lives...though you will no doubt find her strange because of what I did to achieve such a feat. You took from here a chip, containing that which was artificial and digital. Now, I give to you-"**

He felt warm hands, tingling with their static electricity, wrap around his armor and sink into it. A body pressed against his, though that too faded into his suit, and a familiar blue color tinted his visor's screen. In that instant, John-117 knew what it was like to feel overjoyed; never again would he need to say that she was dead, that there was nothing to be done about her. She was here, with him, again.

"**"-an immortal of the Organon, which the Forerunners call the Domain, reversed from digital life to flesh. She is Cortana, which in the Eldar Tongue of the Flood meant Queen...and you, John one-seventeen, the Master Chief, Reclaimer, child of the children, are Sek'het Elddama: bearer of the Mantle. You are now the Mouth, Sword and Mind of the Grave. It is your honor and your duty to uphold the history of all our peoples. Before you leave, however, I would give you one final gift."**

As the Master Chief waited, he saw the Gravemind's form wither; from its mouth exited a humanoid, of the Chief's size, with no truly definitive features. It spoke with the Gravemind, as one. _**"Those of the Precursor race, which were consumed long before your time and of whom I was one, had the power to manipulate an organism's biological evolution. You experienced this to a very minor degree with the Forerunner known as the Librarian, but she knew only the barest minimum of our ability...you will need it. While the Flood were initially peaceful, there were several more ancient denizens of the galaxy and universe that are decidedly not. They still exist, in hiding, but the day will come when only you will stand in the defense of humanity. Had you been born a hundred thousand years ago, John-117, the Forerunners would have lost their war against your kind."**_

It touched his chest plate, and that was when the pain began. He felt it everywhere, unbearably agonizing blades and needles that not even Cortana could keep him from feeling. His skin shredded itself, his muscles tightening and rewinding over bones which became even more

dense than they had been. His skin rebuilt itself, years practically melting from his face until the Master Chief under his armor looked to be no more than a man in his late twenties. All his physical augmentations were increased in their measures, and his strength felt as though it had multiplied a thousandfold...by the time it was over, a very long and excruciating half-hour, the Master Chief felt like a new man.

"What did you do?"

"**"I gave you a lifespan to match your ancilla's, and the strength you will need to hold the Mantle of Responsibility for yourself alone; it was meant for an entire race, but there are none now who have the power to hold it. If you wish to find more, seek out Charum Hakkor. There, in the shadow of the Humans of old, you will find your answers."**

The Gravemind shriveled, collapsing in upon itself...the Master Chief didn't need to be told what to do; he ran, far and fast, doing his best to escape the death throes of an entire race. His heart pounding, his muscles surging, he ran with the wind and climbed with the earth. All around him, High Charity was collapsing...stone and metal and flesh were falling, raining down. He had no time to dodge or move, jumping over the larger pieces of debris when he had to, until he finally made it to the Pelican on an outside ridge. Only then, as he was flying away, did he pause to think about all that had happened.

"Cortana. You're..."

"Yes." Her voice came, still the same as he remembered. "I'm not just an AI anymore, I'm a person who lives and breathes like the rest of you. I can still act as an AI if I want to, as you can see, but now I'm more than that."

She moved from his suit, standing before him. Her arm reached out, pressing against his chest in the same way she'd done on Requiem; to his surprise, and hers as well, she almost pushed him over. "I can choose when to become non-solid...wait, did you almost fall down?"

"Maybe."

She laughed, and her smile went all the way to her eyes...while the Master Chief had lost virtually all of his libido in the process that made him into a true SPARTAN, he could certainly appreciate the small things. He wasn't just glad to have her back; it felt like he was whole, and no longer a shadow of his former self. That could also have been the Gravemind's body-reconstruction technique.

She was pale-skinned, with midnight-blue hair and eyes of blue ice. She looked like a much younger Catherine Halsey, as if the Master Chief might have seen her when he was no more than a child, and even their voices weren't that different. She stood just a few inches under his mighty in-MJOLNIR frame, which meant that she were likely to be near his height when he had it removed. While she had been strong enough to make John brace himself, lest he fall over, her muscles weren't particularly defined...which meant that she'd likely undergone the Gravemind's "biological evolution" technique as well.

"In any case...it's good to have you back."

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><p>"Charum Hakkor?" Terrence Hood asked, incredulous. "Where is that?"<p>

"It's an old world." Cortana, for the time being, had taken her AI form. "More than a hundred thousand years ago, it was the capital of the Human-San 'Shyuum Alliance throughout the Orion arm of the Milky Way."

Cortana's explanation was as brief as she could make it, from the advent of the Flood to the rise of the Precursors, their choice of Humans over the Forerunners, the ensuing Precursor-Forerunner war, the Human alliance with the San 'Shyuum, the Human-Flood war, the Human-Forerunner war and humanity's loss after a fifty year siege, the Forerunner-Flood war that wiped out the majority of the Forerunners, all the way to the day where they now stood. She aided her story with memory feeds, which she'd gained access to during her time with the Gravemind, and by the end there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that she was telling the absolute truth.

"You're telling me that ancient humanity not only had the strength to fight the Forerunners on even ground, only losing because they fought the Flood as well, but also that we had an alliance with _Prophets_"

"Yes, but the Prophets from times before the firing of the Halo array were far different from the San 'Shyuum now...in any case, Charum Hakkor was lost. We have no idea if it still exists, or where it might be; all we know is that it's somewhere in the Orion arm of space. You saw what it looks like, so do you have any idea?"

"None. Of all the planets I've seen, there hasn't been one that's looked like that." He was clearly irritated by the lack of knowledge, despite the fact that he shouldn't have known anything. "We do have a lead, though. You said it's in the Orion arm, and there's very little of that which hasn't been mapped out-we can draw from our databases to find out if we've already discovered and re-named it. And, failing that, there's still some of the Orion arm that hasn't been explored."

It was a start.

"Lord Hood, I'm more worried with something else that the Gravemind said: other aliens, older even than the Flood, who aren't peaceful and that still exist today." The Master Chief spoke his mind. "If that's the case, then we aren't going to be safe forever. Even with the Flood gone, and the Covenant no longer against us..."

"I know, one-seventeen, and I'm concerned as well. However, we would need to find Charum Hakkor to get the answers we need...something that we can't do just yet. I'll have people searching our network for information, and send out exploration teams if that fails. You've earned a rest, SPARTAN, for a job well done."

"Thank you, sir." With a quick salute, and Cortana manifesting into a physical form, he walked out of the room.

From there, he went to the gym; while he knew that the Gravemind's meddling had made him stronger, he didn't know just how much stronger he'd become. He moved to the weight bench that had been specifically designed for out-of-armor SPARTANs, as even the smallest weights were unable to be lifted by normal humans...of course, he'd always been one to push the upper limits of what a SPARTAN was able to do. He still held that his Mark-VII MJOLNIR armor was far better than the newer GEN2 suits preferred by the SPARTAN-IVs, and had mentioned it several times to all of them. They seemed to think that they held some sort of moral superiority over him, even as they respected and lauded him, because they had chosen to become SPARTANs rather than having it forced upon them.

Quite frankly, he didn't care.

He stocked the bar as high as he always had, at four thousand pounds of solid weight; it was the highest that he'd ever managed to go, even in his suit, and he wanted to test his limits...getting on the bench, he put his arms up and lifted.

"It's lighter than I thought it'd be."

He stacked another thousand on, and the strain wasn't noticeably increased. Two thousand on top of that, and he felt like there was an actual weight to be lifted. At ten thousand pounds, five tons, he began to have trouble in continuing to lift...his limit, he found, was fifteen thousand pounds. By the time he finished, a small crowd of soldiers had gathered to watch; one of them went to a small board on the left side of the room, tallying up the total weight lifted.

"SPARTAN Sierra one-seventeen has passed his own record of four thousand pounds by nearly four times, and remains at the number one spot for most weight bench-pressed."

Ignoring them, he exited through the room's other door. Entering his own room, which was larger and more spacious than he remembered, he sat down on his bed.

"It's more empty than I thought it'd be." Cortana said. "A bed, a desk, a table, a single chair, with a giant private restroom next to it. And yet, for all that, you have done literally nothing about decorating it."

"What would I put here?" He responded. "I don't have any pictures, and there's not too much that I'd care to remember about my past. The only thing I own is a quarter from the United States government, more than five hundred years ago, and I keep that in the right palm of my armor, inside the black suit."

She sighed. "That's not the point, John. Believe me, I know about your life. I even saw what happened a few months ago, in your memory...and I'm sorry you had to go through that. All the same, however, I'm still here."

His response was a long time coming, an old joke brought to life.

"So now we have proof that you're a human and I'm a machine."

* * *

><p>I think that turned out well...I'm not sure when the next update will be, but it shouldn't be too long in the wings.

****Keep your MA5s close and your AIs closer.****

End
file.